

## Not peace but division

*Jeremiah 23:23–29*

*Luke 12:49–56*

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War nearly 400,000 people have died (Syrian Observatory on Human Rights); in the last week, 100,000 have been displaced around Idlib by the army's new initiative. (ABC News) And in that context Jesus's words are rather difficult to take:

Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth?

No, I tell you, but rather division!

Luke 12:51

Can it be that violence and destruction are part of God's will? Are we wrong to believe that Christianity is a religion of peace?

Well, perhaps the prophet Jeremiah can bring some perspective here. Jeremiah, honoured as a prophet by Jews and Moslems as well as Christians, lived just over 500 years before Jesus. He was a prophet not in the sense that he simply foretold the future, but in the sense that he spoke the truth, as he understood it, from God. And the message he gave was that if the people of Israel persisted in their disobedience to God then they would be invaded by neighbouring countries and lose their independence. Actions would have consequences.

It was not a popular thing to say and it brought him into conflict with other prophets who offered a much more comforting message. The passage we heard a few minutes ago represented the complaint of God against the false prophets and his insistence that the truth must be spoken when wrong has been done:

Is not my word like fire, says the Lord, and like a hammer that breaks a rock in pieces?

*Jeremiah 23: 29*

So from these words we begin to understand why Jesus himself made such gloomy prophesies. If a prophet insists on speaking the truth

and others deny the truth then conflict is inevitable. He himself experienced rejection in his hometown and ultimately died because of the way he lived his life and what he taught. Many of his immediate followers, including St James and St Margaret, gave their lives because they spoke up for the truth. And nothing has changed in our own time.

So do we have to choose between truth and peace ? Well it is not that simple. But I would like to put it like this: the pursuit of peace will not in itself lead to truth or justice; but the pursuit of truth and justice will lead to peace because true peace cannot exist without truth and justice.

To put it to the other way round, injustice and falsehood will always lead to violence. This can be seen in so many contemporary situations. One that has been familiar to us all our lives has been that of Northern Ireland. The violence there had its origins in injustice. For centuries the rights of the native Irish were suppressed by invaders from England and Scotland. And in the years after independence the Unionists operated in Northern Ireland as if the nationalists did not exist. Violence resulted because there was neither truth nor justice.

And it worked both ways because at various times both communities felt they were being treated unjustly and so both resorted to violence. And in so far as peace has been achieved in the it has been because there is a greater sense of justice. Greater violence can always be used to repress lesser violence. But only truth and justice lead to real peace. And that is the argument against violence, whether the violence of the terrorist or the violence of the state. True justice cannot be achieved by violence. You cannot achieve peace through violence.

I think it is important to note what Jesus is saying - and what he is not saying. He is saying that following him may lead to division and a lack of peace. But he is not saying that either he or his followers should deliberately bring it about. That is the choice that will be made by others. Our responsibility is to speak the truth and to be prepared for the consequences.

So what does that mean in practice?

Sometimes that is very hard to see. Perhaps, rather perversely we sometimes need to travel a great distance from our own culture to see what is going on. A few years ago, Lynn and I spent some time touring Florida and learning something of their history - so very different from ours!

One of the most moving places we visited was the home of two of the first Civil Rights martyrs, Harry and Harriette Moore. They spoke the truth by investigating every murder of black people by white people; demanding equal pay for black and white teachers in state schools; protesting against primary elections in which there were no black candidates and demanding fair trials for black people. As a result, Harry Moore was sacked from his job as a teacher. And they both died in 1951 after their house was bombed. No one was ever convicted of the murder although in 2006 four members of the Ku Klux Klan, long dead themselves, were identified as chief suspects. Speaking the truth brought to division for Harry and Harriette Moore in a particularly vicious way.

It took over a decade for the civil rights they demanded to be achieved. Not until 1968 did the state of Florida allow black and white people to marry each other - that is well within the lifetime of nearly every one in this church. But discrimination in Florida is not over. My young god daughter told of how she stood in a bank queue behind an older black man. The cashier called her over but Jenny turned to the black man and said

I think you were before me.

'No Mam,' he said, 'you go first'.

He knew his place. And the museum we visited, staffed by black people, was very hard to find. The signage from the main road was negligible and local shop keepers had no idea where it was. It was as if the local white population had no desire to face up to their past. In that context it is not hard to understand why shootings of black men by

police officers in the United States are often followed by communal violence.

So, I, as an Englishman, can sit in judgement on the racism of the people of Florida. That is really quite easy. But what might the people of Florida see if they visited Britain? Or perhaps we should ask what they might not see.

In the city of Tampa, on the west coast of Florida, we came across a quite remarkable statue with this inscription:

Dedicated to those courageous man and women who came to this country in search of personal freedom, economic opportunity and a future of hope for their families.

It was called the Immigrant Statue.

Where, I wonder, in Leeds or Bradford would a Floridian find an Immigrant Statue? Where would a visitor from Florida find a celebration of 'those courageous men and women' from the Czech Republic, Romania, the Caribbean or Pakistan who 'came to Britain in search of personal freedom, economic opportunity and a future of hope for their families?' Perhaps we do not have to look far to see the injustice in our own midst.

And nor do we have to look far to see God's response. In today's gospel we find his promise that justice will be done and that for some people justice will be quite difficult to take:

when you see a cloud rising rising in the west, you immediately say, 'it is going to rain'; and so it happens. When you see the south wind blowing, you say 'there will be scorching heat'; and it happens. You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the potents of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?

Luke 12: 55 to 56.

*N Clews*  
*18th August 2019*

